

The discreet charm of sewers

Reviewed by
Ian Thomson

The Third Man's Vienna: Celebrating a Film Classic

by Brigitte Timmermann

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Public visits to the sewers of Vienna are rare: the clammy atmosphere can cause breathing problems. Nevertheless in 1994 I visited them with a local Graham Greene enthusiast, Brigitte Timmermann. Greene's darkest entertainment, *The Third Man*, ends with a shoot-out in the Vienna sewers and the death of the penicillin racketeer Harry Lime. With his alley-rat amorality, Lime is a familiar Greene character; I wanted to catch a glimpse of his life down a manhole. The sewer entrance by the Stadtpark U-bahn was apparently much as it had been in Greene's day. (I half expected to see the Austrian police in pursuit of Lime.) As we descended into the darkness I could make out a graffito on the wall: 'Lime is my favourite fruit.' I did not see Timmermann again for 12 years.

Last October, by a coincidence, I bumped into her at Berkhamsted Collegiate School, where Greene had been a pupil. A buffet supper was being held in the Old Hall to mark Greene's birthday. Koo Stark (who said she had known Greene) was seated at our table next to Miranda France, author of *Bad Times in Buenos Aires*. I was chatting to Miss France about Austrian zither music when a voice at my elbow said, 'Don't I know you from the sewers?' Brigitte Timmermann had not changed much since we met in the Austrian capital. In the boot of her car, she said with a smile, were boxfuls of her latest book, *The Third Man's Vienna: Celebrating a Film Classic*. Would I like a copy?

Sumptuously illustrated, Timmermann's book charts the birth of one of the greatest films of the 20th century. Years of research have gone into it; cinema fans will enjoy the author's diligent sleuthing in the footsteps of Greene, as well as the book's many production stills and location maps. In its first incarnation, *The Third Man* was not intended to be read as a novella, but as an early draft for a screenplay (commissioned in 1947 by the London-based film producer Alexander Korda). Greene wanted to write the Lime story first as a book in order to explore characterisation and detail. The film, of course, starred Orson Welles as the shabby Lime.

Vienna was the perfect setting for Greene's tale of double-dealing and opportunist loyalties. The city stood on the border between the Soviet empire and the capitalist West and, on one level, *The Third Man* may be read as a Cold War allegory. Greene wrote the treatment in 1948 when tensions between West and East began to emerge after Stalin blockaded Berlin that summer. Timmermann is tempted to see Lime as the fictional counterpart of the British spy Kim Philby, who had betrayed fellow agents to the Soviet Union. Greene knew Philby well during the war when he worked for him in British Intelligence, and he stayed in touch with his former chief long after he had been exposed as a Russian agent in 1963. Philby had helped communists to escape through the Vienna sewers in 1934; newspapers later dubbed him 'The Third Man'. However, it would be a mistake, I think, to read too much into the idea of Lime as Philby. The racketeer is a compound of many men whom Greene had known. His surname suggests not only 'Graham Greene' (lime green) but the quicklime in which murderers were said to be buried.

Throughout, Timmermann brilliantly recreates the destroyed baroque elegance of Vienna and the business of filming a masterpiece there. When Greene visited the 'smashed, dreary' city in February 1948, it was divided into four occupied zones: Russian, American, French,

British. Kim Philby's old channels of pursuit and escape — the sewers — had become an international no-man's-land where criminals like Lime could move about unchecked by the city's quadri- partite control.

As Charles Drazin pointed out in his book *In Search of The Third Man* (1999), Lime's last stand in the sewers could almost be a burlesque of the cheap Western novels which his friend Holly Martins writes for a living. However, if Lime felt at home in the sewers, Orson Welles initially refused to have anything to do with them. 'I can't work in the sewers,' he complained to the film's director Carol Reed. 'I come from California!' Eventually, suitably perfumed, Welles was persuaded to appear in a couple of sewer shots. (Reed used a long-suffering double for other scenes.) A splendid book, *The Third Man's Vienna* absorbed me from beginning to end; rarely have sewers looked so alluring.

Ian Thomson's biography of Primo Levi (Vintage) won the Royal Society of Literature W. H. Heinemann Award 2003.

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